

Final diagnosis: lack of responsibility

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The bodies of power of all levels throughout the post-Soviet environment face a major challenge of learning to be accountable for their actions (or the failure to act), to take adequate timely steps and, most important, to tell the truth to their peoples. The experience of perestroika and the current years, from Chornobyl to the Kursk submarine, has proved that far from all leaders manage to respond to the challenge appropriately.

In the last days of August 2000 the Pervomaisky district of the Mykolayiv region, Ukraine, was announced by President Kuchma to be an environmental catastrophe area. The presidential decree assigned the area a special status for one year, till September 1, 2001. The decision followed proliferation of an unknown disease, never registered in Ukraine before, that had stricken four villages of the Pervomaisky district: Boleslavchik, Chausove, Pidhirya and Michurine. Officially the disease was identified as toxicodermia.

Following the President's order, the Cabinet of Ministers appointed an ad hoc commission led by Vice Prime Minister Mykola Zhulynsky to deal with the issue. Members of the commission, supposed to find a solution for the problem, included Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources Ivan Zayets, Minister of the Emergencies Vasyl Durdynets, Minister of Health Care Vitaly Moskalenko, representatives of other relevant ministries, departments and academia.

The affected residents of the area were diagnosed as suffering from acute chemical poisoning, though specialists were unable to identify the agent. There have been several versions as to what caused the accident. According to one of the hypotheses, a group of scientists led by Deputy Director of the Institute of Ecological Hygiene and Toxicology Prof. Roman Sova found that the soil and water on site contained formic-aldehyde, nitrocompounds, and excessive amounts of fluorine. Besides, the amount of these agents found in potable water reservoirs and soil in villages located between the Yuzhnyi Boog and the Syniukha is 10 to 15 times above normal.

Remarkably, various officials quoted different numbers of people affected by the disease. While the parliament's official newspaper Holos Ukrainy referred to 410 affected persons (Holos Ukrainy, September 1, 2000), later on smaller figures were given. Minister of the Emergencies Vasyl Durdynets quoted the findings of the Interdepartmental Commission, established to investigate the causes of the disaster: the disease stroke 378 persons, 170 adults and 208 children (Den, September 5, 2000).

The environmental disaster highlighted some non-environmental facts of relations between the government and the citizens. The challenge reflected the failure of interaction between the power-holders and the society, and inability or unwillingness of governmental institutions to act in a transparent and prompt manner. Generally, the Pervomaisk tragedy showed that the bureaucracy failed again.

Again, the society has been left on its own to observe in astonishment the total inaction and helplessness of Ukrainian officials. The fact is that the first information about the unknown disease was published on June 15, 2000 (!), but virtually nothing was done in two months to cope with the situation. Instead, there were traditional efforts to hide the facts. Information about new cases of the disease seemed to gain no attention of the Ukrainian official establishment.

Meanwhile, Ukraine observed the fire at the Ostankino TV tower in Moscow, mourned the tragedy of the Kursk submarine (in a way, similar to the developments in the Pervomaisk district in terms of the authorities' failure to respond adequately, as a remarkable display of passiveness and the lack of transparency of the government, and attempts to hide information from the society). However, the suffering of Boleslavchik residents looked too insignificant compared to the recent major accidents in Russia that attracted broad attention of the international community.

The two past months were marked by massive proliferation of the unknown disease in the Pervomaisky district. Yet, it took the local and national officials quite a long time to start paying attention to lives and health of their fellow countrymen.

The events in the Mykolayiv region and the authorities' actions looked notoriously similar to the reaction to the Chornobyl catastrophe on April 26, 1986. Both then and now, the authorities' reactions were too late, chaotic and inconsistent. The difference was only the level of freedom of access to information, though sometimes controversial. However, it should be noted that residents of the affected villages were mainly cut off the information flow, as local authorities would simply switch off the local TV transmitter when national news programs were broadcast.

The information that arrived from the site of the disaster resembled reports from a battlefield, but it did not seem to impress many officials, and even fewer were inclined to act. However, a vivid "chain reaction" among bureaucrats started at the end of August when President Kuchma went to inspect the area personally. The public announcement of the official version of the causes of the disaster on August 29 coincided with the President's trip to the environmental disaster area, and clearly demonstrated the inertia in the actions of national and local authorities, inherited from the command-administrative system. The chronology of the process showed that for a number of officials the priority is, as before, keeping their seats rather than acting promptly and adequately to the challenge.

Disclosure and analysis of causes of the tragedy also displayed a good deal of inconsistency in the official reaction. Different governmental agencies offered at least two working versions of causes of the disease and contamination of the area. One of the quoted causes was closely linked to activities of the Armed Forces, while the other, as President Kuchma's press secretary Oleksandr Martynenko put it, saw the disaster as a result of excessive use of nitrates by a South Korean company that had rented land in the district (Holos Ukrainy, September 1, 2000). However, final conclusions were to be made by the special commission, Mr. Martynenko remarked. No more specific information was offered. However, preliminary tests did not prove the version about contamination of the Pervomaisky district of the Mykolayiv region with nitrates, according to Mykhailo Troitsky, head of the radiological department of the Mykolayiv Regional Design and Technology Center for Soil Protection and Product Quality (Molod Ukrainy, September 1, 2000).

The final official conclusion has not been announced yet, and the debates over the announcement of investigation results show striking diversity of expert opinions. For the first time in over ten (!) weeks after the epidemics began, an opinion about causes of the disease was offered by Ukrainian medical authorities on August 30, 2000. According to the official statement of the Ministry of Health Care, the most likely cause of the disease identified as toxicodermia was "the arrival to the living environment of chemical substances from military sites and their territories, contaminated with technological wastes" (Silski Visti, August 31, 2000). According to the Ministry of Health Care, the diagnosis for the affected population was the evidence of poisoning with a chemical substance, but it was unclear which one. Logically, one may assume that the army activity was a direct cause of the environmental disaster - particularly given the fact that the soil on the site contained chemical elements that were markers of products of decay of missile fuel or its oxidants.

The Ukrainian military officials, however, were reluctant to accept the claims and take responsibility for the disaster, choosing to stay in the "information shadow". Specifically, commenting on the statement made by the Ministry of Health Care about the role of the military sites in the environmental problem, military officials, according to Chief State Sanitary Doctor Olga Bobyliova, reacted to the medical request of information with a note indicating that no extraordinary situations had occurred, and no cases of disease were registered in the military unit deployed near the site of the accident.

Noteworthy, the Ukrainian medical specialists involved are still unclear about the way of the poisonous chemicals to the water and the soil. However, experts suggest that the event might have been caused by the "color metal rush" currently experienced by Ukraine whose impoverished population dig into abandoned industrial sites in search for metal debris. In economically depressed areas where salaries and wages have not been paid for months, where electricity and gas cut-offs are frequent, gathering and selling any metal things is a major source of income for a "small Ukrainian" (as Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko refers to his ordinary fellow citizens). Hence, according to some experts' version, the "metal hunters" happened to dig into a pit where the debris of an old destroyed missile launcher had been buried. Although this is only one of the versions, if it is proved to be correct, the "Ukrainian toxicodermia" can be regarded as a primarily social disease caused by the facts similar to the ones that have resulted in unprecedented spread of TB on the verge of the XXI century. The general cause is the dramatic deterioration of the social and economic conditions of living and the failure of governmental institutions supposed to be responsible for safety of the society in general and such dangerous sites in particular.

However, proving any of the versions is likely to be a hard thing to do. Minister of Defence Army General Oleksandr Kuzmuk refuted the conclusions of the Ministry of Health Care about any role the military sites might have played in causing the massive spread of the disease in the Mykolayiv region. As Minister Kuzmuk stated at the session of the governmental commission, he did not believe that missile fuel decay products might have caused the multiple toxicodermia cases. In his opinion, having made public that version the Ministry of Health Care lacked solid proof to support its claims. In order to finally identify the nature of the disease in the Mykolayiv region it was necessary to open the missile waste dump. However, as staff officer of the 43rd Missile Army Col. Volodymyr Shapoval stressed in his interview to the UNIAN press agency, "conclusions made by the Ministry of Health Care about the

involvement of the debris of the military missiles in the disease will remain only a supposition until the dump is open" (Molod Ukrainy, August 31, 2000).

The military officials' protests against the medical professionals' working hypotheses resembled the Ukrainian Armed Forces leadership's reaction to the accident on April 20, 2000, when a training missile fired at the military exercise in the vicinity of Kyiv hit a block of flats in the town of Brovary. Then, three civilians - two women and a man - were killed, and major damage was done to property and apartments, but the Ministry of Defense kept denying any charges that the accident had been caused by their stray missile. On April 21, 2000, head of the Information Group of the MOD Press Service Igor Khalyavinsky stated that possibility was excluded completely. But as it was increasingly difficult to deny the facts, on April 24 the military officials publicly admitted responsibility for the accident and proceeded with traditional "organizational conclusions", i.e., firing some military bureaucrats deemed guilty.

Something similar could be observed in the Pervomaisky accident. Yet, it seems that President Kuchma is not inclined to share Minister Kuzmuk's "optimism", though he also is not sure that the Ministry of Health Care is right in explaining the massive cases of disease as a result of proliferation of chemical agents from contaminated military sites. Even if this hypothesis is proven and accepted, the blame will not be with the Ukrainian Armed Forces, but with the no longer existing army of the collapsed Soviet Union. The territory currently affected by the disease was the Soviet missile launcher site. While the launchers were destroyed, their silos remained, and the area has never been properly cleaned.

On August 31, President Kuchma was reported to have written a letter to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin regarding the accident, explaining that according to one of the hypotheses of the environmental disaster was the impact on human bodies of missile fuel and its components that might have remained in one of the missile waste dumps in the area. As the letter suggests, Ukraine still lacks relevant information about missile waste burial places, as well as about other radioactive and chemical waste dumps that are environmental and technogenic threats to this country and the entire region. Therefore, the Ukrainian president asked the Russian party to assist in the investigation and provide relevant Ukrainian governmental agencies with adequate information about missile burial places as well as radioactive and chemical material dumps made in Ukraine before the end of 1991.

Hence, a rather sad conclusion comes to mind: Ukrainian officials simply do not have adequate information about the dangerous Soviet military legacy on Ukraine's territory. The existing waste dumps are not secure, not guarded and their safety has not been tested. Moreover, it is unclear who is supposed to take responsibility for the "time mine" that can explode virtually anywhere and anytime. Hence, there is no guarantee that something similar to the Pervomaisk disaster will not occur again. In this context it is worth noting yet another warning and public reproach made by the President to the government for the latter's inadequate operation. Speaking at the session of the governmental commission in Pervomaisk, Leonid Kuchma stressed that "the government must draw adequate conclusions immediately". In his view, liability for the spread of the epidemics "must be with the Cabinet of Ministers and, in particular, Minister of Health Care Vitaly Moskalenko" (Molod Ukrainy, August 31, 2000). However, the emphasis was not only on the failure of the Ministry of Health Care. Leonid Kuchma stated, among other things, that the administrative reform "has not made the government any better; on the contrary, it has become even more difficult to knock to" (Molod Ukrainy, August 31, 2000).

According to Minister of Health Care Vitaly Moskalenko, preliminary data about the causes of toxicodermia are to be prepared by September 12, 2000. However, in general, notwithstanding the final conclusions to be made by the Interdepartmental Commission of Ukrainian and foreign experts, one thing seems to be evident: the society has been given yet another reason to view the government's carelessness and inertia. Should the relevant governmental agencies have reacted to the challenge immediately, the number of affected persons could have been much smaller. However, today the society is still unclear about the agency that should take responsibility for public safety, and the issue of responsibility and accountability of the government remains its most sensitive weak point. P.S. Speaking at a press conference on September 11, 2000, head of the General Military Medical Department of the Ministry of Defense Lt. Gen. of the medical service Volodymyr Bilyi who led the group of military medical specialists investigating the causes of the environmental disaster in the Pervomaisk district announced that the military medical specialists had found no evidence of chronic intoxication with missile fuel components, specifically, with heptyl. Instead, in his words, 80 percent of the local population were "infected" with strong psycho-emotional stress caused by the journalists. Minister of Defense Oleksandr Kuzmuk was also inclined to blame the journalists. As he told the Interfax-Ukraine news agency in Kharkiv, the fact that the MoD provided assistance to those suffering from toxicodermia did not mean that the military took responsibility for the spread of the disease.